

The Newark Extended Learning Initiative

Summary

This report accompanies the e-learning guidance notes provided by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in support of the process of strategic area review (StAR) conducted by local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). It presents a case study of an ongoing project to establish a connected learning community using information and communications technology in its broadest sense. It provides a background to the project with relevant information on the context, details of the planning stages and the parties involved and ends with a list of suggested considerations for those planning similar projects.

This report is of interest to strategic planning managers and those involved in e-learning within local LSCs and other stakeholder organisations.

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The Newark Extended Learning Initiative

Introduction

- 1 This case study has been written to supplement the e-learning guidance notes provided in support of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) strategic area review (StAR) process. It describes an approach to the creation of a learning community, using information and communications technology (ICT) to support and enhance learning, in the Newark area of Nottinghamshire.
- 2 Thanks are due to the LSC Nottinghamshire for assistance in compiling this case study.

Summary

- 3 The Newark Extended Learning Initiative (NELI) is a collaborative project developed by North Nottinghamshire Learning Partnership (NNLP) and involves:
 - Nottinghamshire County Council;
 - the local education authority;
 - Newark and Sherwood College;
 - the LSC Nottinghamshire; and
 - the Newark and Sherwood Local Strategic Partnership.
- 4 Its purpose is to develop a connected learning community (CLC) and to establish a means by which there can be learning anytime, anywhere and for anyone within the Newark area.
- 5 NELI is intended to provide access to e-learning for, and embed e-learning in the everyday experiences of, pupils at primary and secondary schools, students at colleges and adults through their workplace, at home or through

libraries and community access centres. It is, consequently, an infrastructure project.

- 6 A fundamental aim of NELI is to test the concept of a CLC and to provide a model that might be adopted by other areas.
- 7 NELI involves:
 - promoting the benefits of e-learning to the various teaching and learning communities in the Newark area;
 - developing enthusiasm for e-learning among these groups;
 - investment in connectivity to increase and improve access to e-learning;
 - identifying, evaluating, developing and organising e-learning materials;
 - hosting and providing access to e-learning materials;
 - programmes of staff training and professional development; and
 - the use of local champions to demonstrate that this approach can work for a whole community.
- 8 This work is being undertaken over a three-year period starting in early 2003.
- 9 Financial support of about £1 million is being supplied by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), with match-funding provided by the local authority, the local education authority (LEA), Newark and Sherwood College and LSC Nottinghamshire from their existing core organisational expenditure. (Availability of competitive funding may not, of course, be of direct relevance to StARs.)
- 10 The project is being actively supported by the local regional development agency (RDA), in this case, the East Midlands Development Agency (emda), and by the Newark and Sherwood Local Strategic Partnership (NSLSP).
- 11 The principal educational institutions involved are:
 - Newark and Sherwood College;
 - three secondary schools;
 - one special school; and

- 18 primary schools.
- 12 Newark and Sherwood College is taking a lead role in the project as the primary contractor providing management resource and technical support.
- 13 A management liaison group is responsible for detailed project planning. This group is constituted from representatives of the NNLP, Nottinghamshire County Council, the LEA and the LSC Nottinghamshire, together with the Newark and Sherwood College project team.
- 14 The strategic direction of the project is overseen by a steering group that includes a wide range of interested parties. In addition to the organisations represented on the management group, there is representation from primary and secondary schools, the voluntary sector, the RDA, the local learning and skills partnership, SRB and employers in both the private sector and the NHS to represent local training provision.
- 15 The remainder of this case study describes the origins of the project, its planned activities and the current status.

Background

- 16 The project arose from discussions in early 2001 to explore the proposition that the whole education and training community (schools, further education (FE), higher education (HE), the voluntary and community sector, private training providers, small businesses, users of **learnirect** and UK online centres and libraries, and family members learning at home) can benefit from a connected approach to the provision of e-learning resources. This quickly became a city- and county-wide discussion involving the two local authorities and their LEAs, the RDA, school and FE college representatives, the Ufi and the private sector. The challenge was then to devise a means by which the vision could be implemented and tested.
- 17 As in other parts of the country, a number of initiatives were emerging, but in a potentially disparate manner. The challenge was to try and bring coherence to these, to avoid duplication of effort and cost, and to coordinate

actions and resources where appropriate. The initial response was the formation of a group with a remit to establish a Nottinghamshire connected learning community (CLC). This involved investigating the viability of the concept, identifying barriers to the achievement of a CLC and devising potential solutions, as well as investigating sources of funding.

- 18 This work took place in the emerging context of the 14–19 Green Paper, the *Report of the LSC's Distributed and Electronic Learning Group (DELG)*, the Morrison Report *Get on With IT* and the Success for All Strategy. These various strands were adding to the importance of rational and coordinated approaches to the use of e-learning.
- 19 In forging the CLC group, the LSC Nottinghamshire was cognisant of the potentially conflicting priorities of its members and worked to achieve a consensus. Building relationships with the two LEAs and their corresponding local authorities was a key task, as was ensuring that potential delivery organisations (schools, colleges, and so on) did not feel overlooked. This required a number of meetings over six months or so, but was achieved relatively smoothly, due in no small part to the common view that all parties could share in the benefits of success.
- 20 An early outcome of the CLC group was the development of a framework e-learning strategy. This provided a foundation for the development of discrete projects to test the applicability of the framework. (This framework was funded by the LSC national office and the results disseminated to all local LSCs in early 2002.)
- 21 An immediately recognised danger was the potential for discontinuity of learner experience at points of transition from primary to secondary school and from secondary to FE college or work-based learning (WBL) as a result of disparities in e-learning provision between the respective organisations.
- 22 The proposed solution was the creation of a vertically CLC: that is, a partnership between primary, secondary and further education, private training providers, small businesses, voluntary and community outlets, and

the inclusion of home access. It was agreed that the NNLP would take the project forward on behalf of partner organisations.

- 23 It was felt that Newark was ideally placed to test the concept of a CLC. The existence of major e-learning programmes at Newark and Sherwood College, a Building Learning Communities initiative involving Newark High School and its primary school family and an Anytime Anywhere Learning (AAL) project based on local primary schools all combined to suggest Newark as a suitable testing ground for the CLC project.
- 24 Newark also has demographic and economic characteristics that made it a good candidate for this project. It is a traditional market town with a population divided between a dispersed rural population and a number of population clusters, showing varied economic activity.
- 25 Adult participation in learning and training in Newark is low. Performance in the 14–19 range tends to be poor and achievement in qualifications at Level 2 is unsatisfactory.
- 26 Newark is consequently a natural unit for the examination of learning and training provision (as in a StAR), and it also is large enough to contain all the desired components of a CLC without being too big to manage.
- 27 These circumstances clearly presented an opportunity to address a number of the issues raised by Success for All and the 14–19 Green Paper in respect of widening participation, improving flexibility of provision and increasing access to learning. A CLC requires collaboration between providers and creates opportunities for development of a more integrated provision at 16–19. This in turn allows the offering of a wider curriculum base and the introduction of vocational routes at 14-plus
- 28 Providing opportunities for people of all ages to undertake learning at times and places convenient to their needs and circumstances raises a number of practical and logistical questions.
 - Where would the learning materials come from?

- Who would host them?
 - Who would maintain them?
 - How would access be obtained?
 - What connectivity will be required to deliver the learning material?
 - What infrastructure is needed at each of the places of access?
 - Who will provide learner support?
 - What staff training would be required?
 - What technical support would be required, how would it be provided and what would be the training needs of technical staff?
 - Could the commitment of the key partners be obtained and predictably maintained?
 - Would the necessary funding be available?
- 29 Many of these questions could not be answered until a detailed description of the desired outcomes and intended activities of the project had been produced. This required the establishment of an operational group.

The Operational Group

- 30 This presented another set of challenges. The members of this group needed to be enthusiastic, multi-skilled, expert, able to deal with detailed planning, as well as being supported by their managers in the decisions made.
- 31 People with these characteristics tend to be heavily committed and difficult to release from existing tasks. Senior management support is therefore needed to obtain access to them and for their time to be allocated.
- 32 This group has to recognise the significance of the changes being proposed, the benefits that will accrue and the importance of establishing a common goal; and not be distracted by traditional rivalries. This can be difficult and time-consuming to achieve, especially where the group contains forceful people with strongly held views. Both the steering group and the management group are chaired by the manager of the NNLP. The

NNLP is independent of the partner organisations and is able to play a neutral role in partnership discussions.

The Project

Goals

- 33 The operational group produced a proposal with the following goals:
- ICT to be an integral element in the delivery of the curriculum for all school and college students;
 - use of family learning, either out of hours at school or using school laptops at home where appropriate;
 - a range of access points including homes, community centres, libraries and schools and shared WBL centres on industrial estates;
 - a learner-centred approach using materials which can be accessed at the convenience of the learner;
 - informed tutorial support when required; and
 - a technical infrastructure that allows access to and integration of the Ufi, school, college and private sector broadband networks.
- 34 The suggested timescale for achieving these goals was three years.
- 35 The proposal was submitted by the NNLP to the sub-regional strategic partnership (the SRB budget-holders) for ratification and funding approval.
- 36 Four simultaneous strands of action were identified for execution over three years:
- acquiring and mapping content (that is, learning materials);
 - building capacity at the points of delivery, especially in schools;
 - ensuring the existence of adequate connectivity and infrastructure at the points of delivery; and
 - developing activities in the community.

Activities

- 37 One of the first activities is the establishment of a team (to be called the e-team) based at Newark and Sherwood College to promote, research and deliver e-learning materials. This may include some locally developed materials, but the principal sources will be existing products such as the

National Learning Network (NLN) e-learning materials. Recruitment of this team is under way.

- 38 Some e-team members will work part time, with the total complement equating to four full-time equivalent staff. Expertise in different curriculum areas and with age groups from 14-plus upwards will be sought.
- 39 The e-team will liaise closely with LEA colleagues to ensure compatibility between NELI activities and those of the rest of the LEA.
- 40 One of the key elements of the e-team's work will be the provision of training for staff and parent helpers in participating schools with the aim of enabling each school to become deliverers of community learning. This training will be based on the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards.
- 41 The project will fund additional ICT equipment for schools as part of a schedule of infrastructure improvements.
- 42 There will also be investment in connectivity for the industrial parks in Newark, the participating schools, Newark and Sherwood College, the Newark Library, Newark Hospital and a range of community outlets. This includes the recruitment of two modern apprentices to assist with technical support. Home users will have access through wireless technology and General Packet Radio Service (GPRS) paid for by project funds. The connectivity element of NELI will be supported by the LEA, the East Midlands Broadband Consortium (EMBC) and the East Midlands Metropolitan Area Network (EMMAN).
- 43 The NNLP will be responsible for promoting the benefits of e-learning and will organise events, demonstrations and trials.
- 44 The use of schools as CLCs will be expanded in association with agencies such as the adult and community learning (ACL) service, the colleges and voluntary sector organisations.

- 45 Existing electronic materials (for example, online products, compact disks and so on), together with other locally developed materials, may be used at secondary level in the delivery of vocational general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs). Later, in Years 2 and 3 of the project, there will be a programme of locally created content available across a range of curriculum areas and for needs that have been identified by local employers.
- 46 The ability of school technical staff to support e-learning will be assessed. Staff in all places of delivery will receive training in the use of ICT to supplement existing New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training. There will be a development programme based on the FENTO standards for those who will be using materials, supporting learners or taking responsibility for the management of people and other resources. The FERL practitioners programme may form the basis of a common approach to training practitioners in schools and, ultimately, the WBL and ACL sectors. This staff development programme will operate for the duration of the project.
- 47 There will be continued development of the use of ICT in core subjects in primary schools to enhance teaching and learning in all aspects of the curriculum from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4.
- 48 There will be investment in training and ICT equipment to support community learning.
- 49 The LEA will assess current levels of school infrastructure, advise on appropriate levels of hardware for primary and secondary schools and begin equipping schools to those levels. At the same time, the connectivity requirements of the rest of the Newark area will be assessed by the LEA, FE colleges, EMBC, EMMAN, LSC Nottinghamshire and other interested parties.
- 50 In addition to a 2mb connection to all 23 schools and libraries, there will be fast routing between libraries, schools and colleges. This will create direct links between institutions and homes, bringing several advantages. These

include avoiding the public Internet with a consequent potential reduction in costs, increased speed of data transmission and better data security.

- 51 Community and home learning will be facilitated by links with the library service and voluntary sector organisations, concentrating in the first year on existing AAL projects in Newark and involving families in the most deprived wards where unemployment and health status are below the national average.
- 52 There will be a strong focus on workforce development with companies on the Newark industrial estates being recruited to use e-learning for Skills for Life through to business and management training, and using the principle of AAL through the Internet.

Evaluation arrangements

- 53 During the life of the project, there will be an independent evaluation of the project and a report of lessons learned with suggestions that might guide others who wish to undertake similar projects. This will include an assessment of the outcomes and outputs of the project, the effectiveness of its mode of operation, value for money achieved and any efficiency gains.
- 54 The NLN e-learning materials will be implemented and their use and impact assessed.
- 55 Environments for hosting and delivering the learning materials will be investigated in a variety of ways, including hosting at a college, placing on a school intranet and using external applications service providers and other outsourced facilities.

Outcomes to Date

- 56 The project is at too early a stage to describe any significant outcomes, but the following observations are offered.
 - In a project of this complexity and with this degree of innovation (and therefore risk) it is important to start where there is enthusiasm, commitment and evidence of relevant previous activity.

- Energetic, determined, realistic, articulate and credible champions are needed to overcome initial reservations and objections.
- All potential collaborators need to be involved from the start and allowed to make formative contributions: ensure potential collaborators see the benefits of the project and do not view it as a threat.
- Converting a CLC concept into reality takes time, persistence and patience.
- Disagreements between partners will arise, and tact and diplomacy are needed by the project leader to resolve differences of opinion about aims, objectives, resources and the mode of operation, especially where the project contains potential competitors. Learning partnerships are well placed to fulfil this role.
- Someone of authority, determination and energy is needed to lead the coordination of collaborators, develop plans and arbitrate in disagreements; establishing genuine and effective collaboration is not a trivial task.
- External influencers may try and impose their own agenda on the project and it takes conviction and courage to resist this.
- Establishing adequate connectivity in semi-rural areas that are not well served by broadband can be difficult.
- Getting approval for competitive funding takes a long time.
- Project delivery requires a number of actions to be undertaken simultaneously rather than sequentially and this requires skilled project management.
- People with the requisite skills and knowledge to undertake the above are in short supply.
- Similar projects should expect all significant stages to require adjustments or even the repetition of work. These projects are complex, circumstances will change, and it is unrealistic to expect to identify all the issues at the beginning or to make all decisions correctly. This is, after all, a step into the unknown.
- The constant element needs to be a focus in the needs of learners and not the features or capability of the technology.

Abbreviations

AAL	Anytime Anywhere Learning
ACL	adult and community learning
CLC	connected learning environment
DELG	Distributed and Electronic Learning Group
EMBC	East Midlands Broadband Consortium
emda	East Midlands Development Agency
EMMAN	East Midlands Metropolitan Area Network
FE	further education
FENTO	Further Education National Training Organisation
GCSE	general certificate of secondary education
GPRS	General Packet Radio Service
HE	higher education
ICT	information and communications technology
LEA	local education authority
Local LSC	local Learning and Skills Council
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NELI	Newark Extended Learning Initiative
NLN	National Learning Network
NNLP	North Nottinghamshire Learning Partnership
NOF	New Opportunities Fund
NSLSP	Newark and Sherwood Local Strategic Partnership
RDA	regional development agency
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget
StAR	strategic area review